

Europe's war on two fronts

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Europe is finding itself confronted with two significant and hugely destabilising wars. One of them, in Ukraine, is fully a European war, the other in Israel and Gaza, is on the margins but nevertheless has already shown the potential to wreak havoc on both European foreign and domestic politics. The Middle East, much more than Ukraine, is testing Europe's ability to maintain a coherent and effective international posture. Traditionally, the bloc has been divided vis à vis the region, which is both in the continent's backyard, serves as a source of and conduit for migration and is important for energy resources. And while Ukraine might seem a world away from the Middle East and the issues widely divergent, both conflicts occur in a shared geopolitical context. This makes it all the more urgent to take stock of what European interests are at stake, separate from the hotly debated moral aspects of the conflict.

The hostilities in the Middle East, for one, distract from the focus on the war in Ukraine, even if only diplomatically and politically. It also comes at a time when the solid, Europe-wide and American bipartisan support for Ukraine is starting to show fissures. On the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, there's much less consensus to begin with and the picture is further complicated by increasingly vocal domestic European constituencies with Muslim migrant origins, and the backlash against them, originally from the far right but increasingly also from what was once the centre-right. More unrest in the Middle East, is the not unfounded fear among some European policy makers, could mean more unrest domestically, and even violence.

The difficulties in reaching a common EU position on calling for humanitarian corridors and pauses for aid to Gaza at the leaders' summit last week, show how fraught the issue is and what the differences are between the member states. But this is not new and the absence of the UK post-Brexit will only have had a marginal impact on the negotiations. British governments might on the whole have sided with the northern countries that tend more towards Israel than the southern countries that sometimes lean more towards the Palestinians but the differences were not unbridgeable. France and Germany were reasonably in tandem, meaning a UK voice would not have had a major impact.

The EU's divisions are in marked contrast, though, with its response to the outbreak of hostilities in Ukraine, which not only united the bloc but also saw it send massive aid. Additionally, most countries, and the UK too, opened their borders to Ukrainian refugees. If the conflict in the Middle East were to escalate, something that is still a possibility, although certainly not inevitable, European countries' reception of possible refugees is bound to be a lot less welcoming. Indeed, the most unified policy aspect in dealing with the region has been the prevention of migration, whether from conflicts there, such as Syria and Iraq, or further afield in Afghanistan or from Sub-Saharan Africa. Deals with Turkey, Libya and possibly still Tunisia to stop the flow of migrants, while heavily criticised by human rights organisations, form one of the only focused and reasonably effective European policies aimed at the region and even the UK is indirectly 'benefiting' from them.

So, where the arrival of refugees from Ukraine was not a major issue in Europe, preventing new streams of refugees and safeguarding deals with countries in the Middle East are likely to top the list of European realpolitik interests, even if few politicians will admit to this outright. Rivalling this for the top position of practical political concerns will be the energy supply and its stability and pricing.

While the current instabilities are minor compared to the shock to the energy supply following the Russian attack on Kyiv, they do come at a very inopportune moment for most Europe countries.

Europe has just barely recovered from the energy crisis brought on by the Ukraine conflict and has put in place alternative supplies, partly from the Middle East. As previous conflicts in the region have shown, such ructions inevitably lead to higher energy prices. Most of Europe is still struggling with inflation, increased cost of living expense and slow growth. The last thing the continent needs is a new energy crisis. Yet, gas and oil prices have been climbing steadily and oil might once more breach the symbolic boundary of \$100/barrel.

The Hamas attack on Israel took place on the 50th anniversary of the 1973 Yom Kippur war in which Egypt and Syria attacked Israel. That conflict famously led to the major oil and energy crisis of the 1970s after OPEC put an embargo in place. Such a development is for now unlikely and both the US and Europe have high levels of reserves. But price rises and the threat of disruption highlight criticism by European Greens and others of the way Europe responded to the energy crisis brought on by the Ukraine conflict: not by forcefully reducing demand and rapidly scaling up renewable sources, but by finding alternative fossil fuel supplies that we could have known were as liable to shocks as the supply from Russia.

The West's relationship with its energy suppliers in the Middle East has always been contentious and since Russia has become a bigger player on the market and demand from China and others has increased, the power has tipped ever more towards the producers. Europe is running out of alternative suppliers, so the continent's ability to manage new shocks is limited. It is clearly in the European interest therefore that the conflict does not embroil Iran, for example, which could lead to disruptions of energy supplies through the Strait of Hormuz. Other than that, it points at the need to address energy dependencies more structurally in the short term, rather than in the medium- to longer term.

While the previous points, unrest, migration and energy are all more or less concrete and practical, there is a larger geopolitical issue at stake that links Ukraine and the Middle East. While very little is known about the planning of the Hamas attack on 7 October, Iran at the very least had an indirect role through its support for Hamas. That brings us to Russia, as the Iranian-Russian axis is much more prominent than before, in terms of arms supplies and shared interests. Also, Russia's role in Syria, where Iran too is heavily involved on the same side, has according to some analyses foreshadowed the war on Ukraine. Russia is said to have been emboldened when the West let it and its client Assad government off the hook for its actions in Syria, including the use of chemical weapons and the levelling of large parts of Aleppo and other cities. All of this makes it important to consider how a move in the Middle East by proxies of the Russia-Iran axis should be answered.

Whether or not Russia and/or Iran played any role in the current escalation in the Middle East, both countries for now fare well by it. Putin's Russia sees itself in direct conflict with the West and anything that contributes to its rivals' troubles is welcome. The war in the Middle East also provides a, for Moscow, welcome distraction of the international focus on Ukraine. Iran's position is more ambiguous because it's more vulnerable, both to an escalation of the war and economically. Yet, the conflict once more proves its influence in the region, it destabilises rival, Arab, regimes and it scotches, for now, their diplomatic plans, including rapprochement with Israel.

Looking at the very large picture, both the conflict in Ukraine and the one in the Middle East pit the forces of authoritarian regimes bent on destabilising their perceived Western rivals against those who put more stock in stability and a rules-based international order. One of the problems with that narrative is that Israel, certainly under Benjamin Netanyahu but also under previous governments that allowed settlements to be built, has increasingly flouted that international order, whether to the letter or in spirit. Certainly with the extreme-right wing composition of the current government, its

ambiguous stance on Ukraine, and Netanyahu's close ties with the likes of Viktor Orban, Israel is no paragon of the rules-based international order. Europe's, and the US's, failures in past decades to set very clear red lines in the Middle East, be it for Israel, Russia, Iran or Hamas, whose control over Gaza was allowed to continue, are now being felt. A top priority in the wake of this round of fighting should be to address those failures.